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ABSTRACT

Current research in primary school drama education provides a complex and challenging stage for playing out current theoretical debates in both education and within the specific field of drama. This paper discusses some of these controversies, in particular, the view that education has a modernist agenda, and the conflict this causes in what many see as a post-modern age. Also of interest is how these philosophies play out in the field of drama education. The focus of the paper will be on the issues faced when attempting to position educational research in drama in relation to definitional issues. It will consider how these are reflected within the journey taken by this researcher when defining and delimiting her research question. Contains 11 references. (Author/RS)

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Abstract

Current research in primary school drama education provides a complex and challenging stage for playing out current theoretical debates in both education and within the specific field of drama. This paper discusses some of these controversies, in particular, the view that education has a modernist agenda, and the conflict this causes in what many see as a post-modern age. Also of interest is how these philosophies play out in the field of drama education.

The focus of the paper will be on the issues faced when attempting to position educational research in drama in relation to definitional issues. It will consider how these are reflected within the journey taken by this researcher when defining and delimiting her research question.

Traditionally research is viewed as involving a number of stages including "*.(1)identifying a concern or problem,(2) establishing a conceptual framework, (3) delineating the research phenomenon, (4) determining research methodology and using appropriate data-gathering procedures and techniques, and (5) analysing and reporting data"* . While these are perceived as the greater steps to be tackled, smaller issues, such as defining a topic, can become problematic for new researchers. In addition, research in the arts provides further issues due to the less traditionally empirical nature of the subject area.

The journey of this researcher has forced her to face a number of questions thus far in regards to theoretical debates relating to research, education and the use of drama. This paper focuses on two of these questions, "What is a definition?" and "What is drama?"

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What is a Definition?

"To define is to surround a vague area of ideas with a wall of words"

Samuel Butler, 1835-1902

Traditionally, all researchers are required to provide a definition for the parts of their specific topic. A definition can be described as stating the precise nature of a thing or meaning of a word . Similarly, to delimit, or find the delimitations of something, is to state precisely what is does not intend to do, or to find the boundary of it . This boundary allows a researcher to present not only what a term 'is', but also what it 'isn't' .

When we see these terms, definition and delimitation, together in research, they serve to provide the reader with a clear and concise statement regarding the topic and terms being used by the writer. To reflect the 'precise nature' of drama in education requires an arts researcher to challenge the exactness of this definitional custom in research.

When reading articles to find a definitional statement, it quickly becomes clear that few authors provide an explanation of what they mean by the term drama. Many writers presuppose a definition and presume that the audience for their paper will have the same conceptual awareness of the terms as they have. They do as Fleming suggests, define drama in education as what it is not, rather than focusing on what it is (p34). When reading across dates and countries, this lack of clarity can become a problem when attempting to interpret and apply others' work. Alternatively, these authors may be either consciously or unconsciously taking the view that if the line is not drawn, then it will not need to be defended .

What is Drama?

The subject area of drama in education is continually shifting and growing. Through its emphasis on interaction, experiences are often spontaneous and reflect real life . As stated by Bolton, a teacher cannot guarantee specific meanings will be generated by the participants in a drama session, but the teacher should be aware of the potential in every situation . Drama activities can occur outside a traditional drama class style setting. Simons also supports this view. She states that members of a drama group, even those from common backgrounds, can share a common experience, but can find their most significant moments in different aspects of it. The meaning created by each individual is unique and therefore difficult to define in common language.

A number of articles give support for the definitional problems that have occurred in relation to the way drama is used in education . For example, Fleming describes the consequence of attempting to provide a set of practices for the concept."Drama in Education". He states that trying to do so resulted in educators adopting a *"restricted approach in the 1970s and 1980s and conceptual confusion in the 1990s."*

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Similarly, Libman described the many contradictions that have been present in the United States since the 1950s in relation to the terms 'Creative Drama' and 'Creative Dramatics'. Libman (2000) states that some practitioners wanted to simply use the term 'drama', as when people refer to art, music or dance. In 1976, it was agreed that 'drama' would be its name, with or without the 'creative' addition. To confuse the issue however, at a similar time, Ann Shaw, one of the people whose work helped form the basis for this definition, stated a number of what could be viewed as more specific, synonymous terms she felt needed to be noted for inclusion. As demonstrated in Libman's (2000) article, even those who participated in the process of establishing a definition had difficulties in following their own directive.

Alternatively, and in favour of defining, is the belief that shaping common terminology in order to help those both within and without a field to understand what is being done is useful.

It cannot be denied that a common terminology would assist the research process and development of learning within the arts, and more specifically, drama. The fundamental nature of drama and learning in the arts, however, hinders this occurring. There is a cyclical problem, where to gain a deeper understanding of the field, common terminology would assist understanding. To find common terminology through defining, however, would go against the changeable nature of the subject area.

There is one main factor potentially hindering practitioners from reaching a common terminology, or generally understood explanation of drama in education. An agreement has not been found regarding the greater purpose or *fundamental nature* of the concept.

This discussion presents defining a term as bounding it and seeks to find an alternate way of understanding drama as a flexible and unrestricted entity. By presenting a term as having a fundamental nature, the focus is not on considering specific applications. The aim instead is to identify its underlying principles, its core.

The aim of this researcher, to avoid a definition, could be viewed as drawing on an element of a post-modern perspective, as it objects to universality and bounding ideas. In addition, attempting to define post-modernism itself goes against its own nature or the core of the perspective.

When viewing the similarities between an intent not to limit drama, and an understanding of the non-definitional nature of post-modernism, the problem still remains of how a common language could be found to describe such terms.

Taking the view that what is 'known' is socially constructed, implies that the way in which concepts are understood comes from a consensus which develops within a specific context. It is the belief of the researcher that the fundamental nature of both post-modernism and drama, as presented here, incorporate elements that would be taken as given.

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There are three qualities to post-modernism as it is viewed in this paper; being eclectic, rejecting the idea of universals and being non-definitional. *Being eclectic* means that post-modernism is all-encompassing and accepting. In this way, even elements of modernism would be accepted within post-modern educational practice. The second part, *rejecting universals,* results in a non-acceptance of universal truths. When applied to education, post-modernism challenges a modernist, or traditional view, which is based on the same foundational knowledge for all students. The third part of the post-modern perspective is that it is *non-definitional.* At its core, post-modernism can not be defined as it would then be bounded and boxed. While drama has its own independent fundamental core, the desire to describe not define reflects these post-modern elements.

Drama - Fundamental Nature

As with post-modernism, drama can be viewed as having a set of core ingredients. There are a variety of views in literature, some say drama is everywhere and in every interaction, is experience-based and socially constructed. Others see it as being derived from theatre, or as resembling or reflecting nature. The question must be asked, why can not the fundamental nature of drama in education incorporate all these things and more?

In addition to its fundamental nature, drama is viewed in this paper as having a practical application. The description of this is dependent on whether the drama occurs in an educational environment, within general social interaction, or in a more traditional theatre setting.

The fundamental nature of what drama is can be explained through a comparison with the old-fashioned style Roman Baths. The floor of the baths is heated by a number of fires situated beneath it. The steam from each fire blends together to warm the floor. No one fire in particular can be credited with heating any specific part by itself; however, all are equally important for maintaining an even distribution of heat. In parallel, the four parts that underpin this description of drama work together and are all required to make a drama experience. The first three, experience, interaction and imagination intermingle and impact on each other resulting in the fourth, meaning making.

The terms used are less fixed, and more interpretive resulting in their potential being less boxed or restricted. Seeing drama as having this flexible core allows for it to be applied in an interdisciplinary manner within education. It is not bounded or boxed into existing solely as a 'drama lesson', but is able to be incorporated within a variety of subject areas as an interdisciplinary tool.

The first of these elements is ***experience***. Our daily experiences have an impact on future choices and actions, and therefore future experiences. Linguistically, support for the relationship between the words drama and experience is given by Turner (1974) who states that they have the same root, 'dran'. In a drama or theatrical sense, experience is used in a variety of ways. For example, it is drawn on to assist developing a realistic

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portrayal of a character in a play. Past experiences can enable a person to more easily understand, interpret and respond to others during improvisations. Similarly, the way in which children participate in spontaneous play reflects their understanding of the world based on experience.

The second part of drama's fundamental nature is ***interaction***. Interaction occurs in many ways, and these exchanges are often reflected within drama experiences. Our daily communication can be viewed as a series of role-plays and improvisations based on what we are experiencing and feeling. When we relate a tale to friends, we are participating in an informal storytelling session, sharing past experiences. More formally, interaction is used within drama as an important tool to assist the development of cultural awareness and communication skills with children and adults.

Imagination is the third part, or fire, contributing to the steam that permeates through all drama experiences. Imagination, as with experience, develops from and impacts on a person's daily behaviour. It is the imagination that often enables many new experiences to be participated in and considered. However, not all drama experiences are based on real events. Imagination is called upon when a person is required to participate in an event where they have little or no reference in personal experience. This may, for example, involve the development of a fictional or abstract character. It may also occur in a classroom drama experience when children participate in make-believe activities, creating worlds and friends that are solely based on 'imagination'.

The fourth and final part, or the result, within this proposed fundamental core of drama is ***meaning making***. It is the combining forces of the first three elements described that assist in meaning to be developed and drawn from drama experiences. To understand, or make meaning from something, a person must participate in it in some way. Within drama experiences, different people will derive different meanings based on their individual backgrounds and experiences. The meaning that is taken will then impact on future interactions occurring within the same and other groups. Meaning making is a crucial aspect of drama when considering education. Schooling today focuses on encouraging learning that draws on and expands students' experiences. Drama, being an interactive tool drawing on students' imaginations, can assist this meaning to be attained.

Drama - Practical Application

As stated above, the description of drama being presented in this paper has a fundamental nature and a practical application. The application is dependent on the context within which the drama is being done such as a classroom, social environment, or within a traditional theatrical structure.

As this paper is about drama within education, the description of its practical application is based in this context. It is to be viewed as a continuum stretching from the spontaneous and dramatic play of children to traditional theatre and proposes that all dramatic activities and experiences have a place along this continuum.

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Traditionally drama in education was only seen in schools through the end of year proscenium play and possibly a school talent quest. In present day it is, among other uses, assessed at Higher School Certificate level, used in the teaching of non-English speakers and incorporated into primary school curriculum documents such as the NSW Creative Arts K-6 syllabus and the Queensland Years 1-10 The Arts Syllabus.

Traditional theatre falls at one end of this drama continuum. Experiences are highly structured, potentially incorporating scripts, performers and a rehearsal process. Strategies and techniques developed while participating in the spontaneous play end of the scale can assist with participation in this traditional style experience.

Pinciotti discusses classroom-based examples of how drama could be used as an interdisciplinary tool. In the early years of education, the balance swings more toward dramatic play experiences. Children participate in structured and unstructured activities involving the recreation of their own and imaginary worlds. As children develop, these activities become more guided and begin to rely increasingly on cooperative interaction and teamwork. Participants are encouraged to explore points of view other than their own and will therefore have the potential of a greater number of new experiences.

The cross-curricular nature of drama enables students to explore concepts from a variety of subject areas through traditional drama based activities, including oral storytelling, playbuilding, reader's theatre, puppetry presentations as well as within movement, mime and improvisational sessions. In addition, viewing drama as described above allows for students to safely explore social and emotional issues within these creative parameters.

While describing drama as presented in this paper reflects one understanding of its potential for integration into schooling practices, many more questions remain unanswered regarding drama's place in education. The focus of the research study that fuelled the definitional questions in this paper attempts to investigate one such issue. It aims to identify the link between beliefs, perceptions, past experiences and the chosen pedagogy of teachers in relation to the creative arts (specifically drama). More generally, it aims to enhance knowledge and understanding in relation to drama practices in the hope that an increased understanding will allow teachers to question, learn and inform their practice with a solid understanding of the personal beliefs and perceptions they bring to it.

Drama is an ever changing entity. It can be applied in almost every aspect of life and has great potential within education. It does not have to fall victim to those who fear its integration or see it as a time-waster. The value to all ages of students is clear and the ease of application when viewed as described above results in all teachers and classrooms being able to incorporate drama in their daily teaching.

> "I can teach them math until I am blue in the face, but this (drama experience) is what they will hold in their hearts years from now" - Anonymous

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